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CLARENCE EMMEREN KOBUSKI, 1900–1963

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*With portrait **

CLARENCE EMMEREN KOBUSKI, who died on May 9, 1963, in his 64th year, will be remembered by those who knew him well and worked with him as one of the kindest men on the present American botanical scene. In his little-publicized roles as curator, editor, hospital corpsman, singer, and friend, he touched the lives of more people than may ever refer to his published scientific work. In the lives of many of us there is a gap that could have been left only by the death of a man of his character and generosity.

Kay, as he preferred to be called, was born in Gloversville, New York, on January 9, 1900. His ancestry can be traced to Polish nobility through his father, but after the arrival of the latter in the United States, the family name was shortened for convenience. Kay, one of the first of his family to enter college, graduated from Cornell University in 1924 with a Bachelor of Science degree. While there, his future career was shaped by his teachers in languages and science, including K. M. Wiegand and A. J. Eames. His outstanding scholastic record earned for him a Rufus J. Lackland Fellowship at Washington University, St. Louis, where he pursued his studies in conjunction with the herbarium and taxonomic activities at the Missouri Botanical Garden. He was awarded the degree of Master of Science, in 1925, for "A Revision of the Genus *Priva*" (Verbenaceae) and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, in 1927, with his thesis "A Monograph of the American species of *Dyschoriste*" (Acanthaceae), both accomplished under the direction of Dr. J. M. Greenman. His future research was not again to touch on these families.

For a number of years Professor Alfred Rehder, curator of the Arnold Arboretum, had been corresponding with Dr. Greenman, seeking from the Henry Shaw School of Botany an assistant for the herbarium. It is clear from the correspondence that Rehder was overburdened with routine herbarium work and that he wished time for his own research. Greenman suggested Kobuski, and it was this position, as assistant, which Kobuski

* Photograph by Fabian Bachrach, December, 1961.

accepted in the fall of 1927. Kay delighted in telling of his first days on the job at the Arboretum. Charles Sprague Sargent, director for 50 years, had just died; E. H. Wilson was acting as director; and Rehder was swamped with the responsibilities of editor and curator. On Kobuski's arrival, Rehder presented him with two massive piles of specimens. The first was to be filed "as soon as possible" in the herbarium, which was located for him with a vague sweep of the hand. The second was to be identified "as soon as possible," and there would be "other tasks as well." Not a word was said of "time for research." Although there were other assistants in the herbarium, Kay soon became the backbone of the curatorial staff, and, during the 36 years he served the collection, unmistakable signs of his care and devotion to it became increasingly apparent. Kay's meticulous observance of details in his professional work, and in his personal life as well, marked his career. Over the years at the Arnold Arboretum he inaugurated or implemented a system of accessions, loan records and exchange forms, and of procedures for processing and identifying collections which subsequent students have taken to other institutions, with the result that many are becoming standard in American herbaria.

Kobuski and Rehder presented a great contrast in personality and appearance. Kay was over six feet tall and striking in appearance, with jet black hair. He was friendly and outgoing in his personal relationships with everyone. Rehder, on the other hand, was slight of frame, short, and exceedingly retiring in nature. Despite their differences in physique and temperament there developed between the two men a relationship of lasting quality and mutual benefit. Both were scholars well versed in languages and were masters of Latin and Greek. At this period they complemented each other editorially. Kobuski could polish a sentence; Rehder, with an insight gained from long experience, could resolve the most complex botanical and horticultural problems. Together, they worked on the numerous, challenging collections continuously arriving at the Arboretum from collectors in Asia. Together, they prepared the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* and later read the proofs for Rehder's books. Together, these men continued for nearly two decades, through the trials and errors of successive directors or supervisors, the work for which the Arnold Arboretum is noted.

Kay's many other achievements were less well known. He had a powerful, naturally pleasing baritone voice with an unusually high tenor range, nearly perfect in pitch. He liked to sing, although he had had no formal training until, in 1935, he was persuaded to begin vocal instruction. His first teacher was Theo Carreiro, of Boston, through whose encouragement Kay's inherent love of music gained purpose and direction. Kay bought a piano, began to amass a significant collection of recordings and sheet music, and concentrated on the theory of music. His understanding of languages and of melody allowed more accurate interpretations than is often usual among singers. In 1938, Kobuski became a pupil of H. Wellington Smith, of New York, who taught in Boston one day a week. Before a year had passed, Kobuski was being groomed for an audition at the

Metropolitan Opera. The realization that at his age an operatic career would necessarily be short and that for it he would have to give up taxonomy, after years of botanical training, caused him to decide, regretfully, that his singing should remain largely an avocation. Kay sang often, although botanists, as a group, heard him just once, at a testimonial dinner for J. M. Greenman during the AAAS meetings in Indianapolis in 1937. He sang professionally throughout New England and for over two years was baritone soloist at the Church of St. John the Evangelist, under the direction of Everett Titcomb. The parts assigned to him were demanding, but his strong, clear voice could be heard over a full choir. He enjoyed giving pleasure to his audience, and few who heard him ever forgot the experience. Unfortunately, his wartime service terminated his singing. His love for music persisted however, and he continued to be a devotee of opera until the end.

In October of 1942, Kobuski was drafted in the U. S. Army at an age barely days below the upper age-limit for conscription. His hair was graying when I, nearly 20 years his junior, saw him on an obstacle course at Camp Pickett, Virginia, training to carry a litter in a hospital battalion. His Ph.D. degree brought him only enlisted-man training as a hospital laboratory technician and an assignment to a hospital ship. Kay worked as hard at this as at any professional assignment, and his medical knowledge eventually rivalled that of the younger medical officers under whom he served. In the years following, Kay made twenty-six crossings of the Atlantic under wartime conditions in convoys and in unaccompanied hospital ships, bringing wounded servicemen back from the African and Mediterranean theatres. Perhaps a good corpsman should be impersonal, but Kay carried the burdens of his patients who frequently became a personal concern. Many he cared for remained his friends through the years. Kobuski returned from the service in August, 1946, physically affected by his experience. For therapy he was advised to take up needle-work, but only few of his close friends knew that the many pieces of needlepoint in his home were of his own design and creation.

Several years after his return to civilian life Kay took into his home an ill amputee he had transported as a patient during the war; he cared for this man during the latter's final years of illness. Kay's guest, however, worked at intervals in an antique shop. With the interest of his patient at heart Kay undertook to learn about antiques and soon began to collect them for his own satisfaction. His specialty became lamps, china, and glass, and his collection developed into that of an expert. He amassed not the largest but probably one of the most complete sets of crossed-swords, blue, onion-pattern Meissen china in private ownership. In each of the areas of his interest Kay made and kept friends.

In 1949, Kobuski was appointed both editor of the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* and curator of the herbarium. In both posts his influence became widespread through the years. He had served as associate editor of the *Journal* from 1932 until he left for military service. On his return, though the *Journal* was being issued by an editorial board, Kay did a

large share of the work without assuming the full responsibility. He served as editor from 1949 until he asked to be relieved of the duty in 1958. During his twenty-six years of association with the *Journal* hundreds of manuscripts passed through his hands. Countless students, colleagues, and fellow botanists benefited from his suggestions concerning both the style and content of their manuscripts. Meticulous in detail and insistent on accuracy Kay never could be said to edit "by marking for the printer." On papers submitted to him, he always corrected the Latin descriptions (sometimes supplying words left out by the author), often checked references, verified citations of specimens, or had the manuscript retyped. He was insistent that only clean copy be submitted to the printer, and more than one of the printers who worked on his material expressed pleasure over the manuscript, a credit to the editor rather than the author. Only Kay might have appreciated fully the fact that one of his death notices appeared with a letter in an incorrect font of type.

Kobuski as a curator was unsurpassed. He believed that specimens were in the herbarium to be studied, but he valued more than the majority of botanists the heritage that is the curator's responsibility. Kay was the strict but impartial guardian of the herbarium. If the situation warranted, he would refuse a request from an old friend as readily as one from a complete stranger. An ambiguous letter elicited a reply requesting clarification before specimens were sent out; but that loan when sent was certain to contain the material requested and all unidentified specimens that might be of interest to the investigator. His scorn was deep, however, for the botanist who returned those specimens in poor condition or without annotations; it was limitless for one who cited the specimens incorrectly.

In 1954, a decision was made that a portion of the herbarium of the Arnold Arboretum was to be moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to a new building more integral to the University and its students. It was Kobuski's task to prepare the Arboretum herbarium for this move and to establish, with me, which specimens of cultivated plants might most profitably be left as a working unit with the living collections in Jamaica Plain. Here his long experience in the efficient use of an herbarium for the identification of plants under cultivation proved to be of inestimable value. Over 100,000 specimens were selected from the general collections of the Arnold Arboretum to be the basis for future work in horticultural plant taxonomy. Kay then moved with the remainder of the collections to Cambridge and, in 1954, he was appointed jointly as curator of the Arnold Arboretum and of the Gray Herbarium to implement the reorganization of the two herbaria into one workable unit. He also served as supervisor of the entire Harvard University Herbarium Building. For a period of five years Kay directed the project involving the reorganization of almost two million specimens and their rearrangement in proper systematic and geographic sequence, as well as the recognition and annotation of type specimens and their arrangement in special folders. The Arnold Arboretum and the Gray Herbarium had used different systems of arrangement, and their respective botanists, Rehder and Fernald, did not always

agree on names or species limits. Characteristically, Kay undertook the processing of difficult groups such as the Fagaceae and Juglandaceae where many exacting decisions had to be made. The model combined herbarium created as a result of his tremendous effort remains a monument to his knowledge and ability.

Kobuski's role in the administration of this newly organized herbarium was unique. Two organizations, each with its own herbarium, library, staff, and traditions, were to function in one building under two directors with a single head curator. Few people could have recognized, much less defined adequately, the combined responsibility as well as Kay, who served faithfully and honestly the interests of each organization, dealing fairly with old friends and new associates, carefully submerging his own interests or past loyalties with an impartiality deserving of more admiration and recognition than it received at the time. Kay enjoyed his position immensely. Only rarely did a feeling of nostalgia emerge, and on such infrequent occasions it was manifested by a rather wistful comparison of the restricted view from his new city office with the outlook over the broad acres in Jamaica Plain. His office was the focal point of many activities; but he was available at all times to students, staff, and visitors for informal conversation, professional advice, or discussion of personal problems.

Throughout his professional taxonomic career, Kobuski's tasks were largely assigned or were the result of necessity. He joined the staff of the Arboretum at a time when thousands of specimens were arriving from Asia. As an example, Joseph F. Rock's important collections contained over 25,000 numbers. To Kay and his associates fell the task of sorting these collections for study, preparing lists and duplicate labels, sending sets to specialists, selecting the set to be mounted and inserted, and finally, after determinations were completed, of distributing the duplicates. Throughout his long career at the Arboretum, more collections arrived each year than could be mounted or distributed. As the backlog of unworked material increased curatorial problems also increased proportionately.

Like the early routine duties of the herbarium, Kobuski's first piece of research for the Arnold Arboretum also was assigned by Rehder. A research project, initiated by a former staff member who had resigned because of illness, was given to Kobuski to complete. In this way he began his work on the Theaceae which was to continue throughout his career and to be the basis of his most important published contributions. Thirty-five papers on this difficult family treated genera and species in all tropical areas of the world. The one group of Theaceae which he avoided completely was *Camellia*, with its all too numerous variants. His interest in the genus *Jasminum* began in a similar way: a job to be done in order to solve a problem concerning the correct name for a particular cultivated jasmine, led, ultimately, to a research project. Although his publications do not reveal it, Kay was probably the most knowledgeable American botanist in recent years who worked in the area of cultivated woody plants. After

Rehder's death, Kobuski carried on the voluminous correspondence initiated by Rehder, hopefully, toward a revision of his *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs*, and concerned chiefly with new records and the identification of specimens. It had been Kay's plan, on retirement in 1967, to return to Jamaica Plain to work with the younger taxonomists on such a revised edition of Rehder's work.

Kobuski's published work scarcely indicates the range of other very real contributions. He completely lacked self-ambition but was unswerving in his desire to further the work and the reputation of the institutions with which he was associated. I have never known a more unselfish man. His own research was frequently laid aside in order to help another worker personally or by correspondence. Nearly every major publication of the Arnold Arboretum produced during his career contains his own not insignificant contribution. His help is acknowledged in hundreds of botanical publications, yet an equal number which might well have done so failed to include such acknowledgment.

Kay did not join many societies. He was a member of the American Society of Plant Taxonomists and a charter member of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy. His membership in the New England Botanical Club covered 36 years and he served the club as assistant phaenogamic curator and council member.

Kay had a dramatic personality and a theatrical manner. At the staff luncheon table he always occupied the head chair from which he moderated discussions or regaled the group with anecdotes well told and always in good taste. Others about the table counted on Kay's reaction to their own comments and were not disappointed. The reaction was sometimes explosive, sometimes stoic, or occasionally a mock expression of shock or disbelief, but it was always dramatic.

This dramatic, often explosive manner, combined with his imposing appearance, could be disconcerting to those who did not know him well, and there were those who misunderstood him. He often reacted first, perhaps sounding curt or brusque, but he did not fail to make amends if he realized that he had been misinterpreted. His was a colorful character to which one could not remain neutral.

Kobuski was a bachelor, sometimes seeking solitude, sometimes gregarious. He was a frequent and welcome visitor to the homes of neighbors and friends with families. His kindness to children was unsurpassed, and the love was mutual.

Kobuski is survived by a sister, Agnes Schroeder (Mrs. Henry J.), of Saugerties, New York, and a brother, Lawrence, of Gloversville, New York. He was buried in the family plot in his native town.

There is no simple epitaph for the man who devoted thirty-six dedicated years to one institution. His term of service is exceeded in length only by those of Charles Sprague Sargent and of Alfred Rehder. His heart was truly big. His life was well lived. We miss him.

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